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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001718

SIPDIS

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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS
NSC FOR E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10-02-13

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: Maldives appears calm in aftermath of recent unrest in capital; President transfers chief of police

Refs: Colombo 1674, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: The Maldives appears calm in the wake of the recent unrest in Male' that was triggered by a violent prison disturbance. President Gayoom has launched investigations into the incidents and transferred the police chief. During his recent visit, DATT spoke to the acting police chief, who provided further details on the police shootings at the prison and the Male' riot. At this point, in the midst of the presidential selection process that culminates in an October 17 referendum on whether Gayoom should serve another term, the GoRM appears to have recovered some of its balance and verve after the rare outbreak of unrest. END SUMMARY.

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Maldives Calm in Wake of Unrest
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2. (C) The Maldives appears calm in the wake of the September 20 riots in Male' triggered by the September 19-20 prison disturbance on Maafushi island (see Reftels). The DATT visited Male' and Addu Atoll in the south from September 28-30, and both areas were quiet, with life seemingly going on much as it did before the rare bout of internal unrest. Tourism, a big industry in the Maldives, was continuing apace, with resorts full, and Male's international airport bustling with charter flights carrying European and Japanese tourists.

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Gayoom Launches Investigations
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3. (C) For his part, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom has undertaken several actions meant to address the situation in the aftermath of the unrest, including:

-- Creation of Presidential Commission: Following the death of a prisoner during the prison disturbance at the Maafushi island detention facility on September 19, Gayoom immediately appointed a Presidential Commission to investigate what had transpired. Later, the mandate of the Commission was expanded to include an investigation of both the September 19 prison disturbance and September 20 attack on the National Security Service (NSS) armory on Maafushi in which numerous prisoners were shot by NSS personnel. (Note: From what Mission understands, four prisoners total were killed in the September 19-20 violence on Maafushi, with two dying on the spot and two others subsequently succumbing to their injuries in Colombo hospitals.) In public remarks, Gayoom has repeatedly asserted that the five-member Commission will be independent from the GoRM and will have the needed autonomy to carry out its investigations. The Commission's report is due out in short order.

-- Investigation into Male' Riots: Separate from the Presidential Commission, Gayoom has also opened a governmental investigation into the circumstances surrounding the riot that took place in Male' late on September 20. Numerous public buildings were damaged in the riot, which was sparked by the prison disturbance.

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Transfer of Police Chief
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4. (C) In addition to the twin investigations, Gayoom also made several personnel changes within the NSS, which handles military and police duties in the Maldives. Brigadier Adam Zahir, the deputy chief of staff of the NSS and Commissioner of Police, was reassigned to a second-tier job in the Ministry of Information, Arts, and Culture. In his place, Major

Ibrahim Latheef (see below) was made the Deputy Commissioner of Police for Operations and has effectively been acting as chief of police. Eleven other NSS officers have been fired for their role in the prison disturbance.

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DATT's Discussions with Police Official
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15. (C/NF) During DATT's recent visit to the Maldives, he met with Major Latheef, a longtime Mission contact (inter alia, Latheef was one of the NSS officers the DATT recently took to Guantanamo Bay and who also recently escorted the DCM on a visit to a proposed site for a law enforcement training facility in the Maldives). Latheef provided further details about the prison incident and riots on Male'. After briefly discussing the September 19 riot at the prison facility, Latheef described the following day's incident when prisoners tried to storm the NSS armory, also located on Maafushi. Trying their best to quell the disturbance peacefully, the police first shot into the air to disperse the prisoners. The situation only deteriorated when the prisoners refused to back down and the police were forced to actively defend the armory by shooting directly at the prisoners in self-defense. Turning to the September 20 riot on Male', Latheef estimated that some 300 people took part in the unrest (an Embassy FSN who witnessed the event estimated about 600). The police ultimately arrested 121 people, 75 of whom were released within 48 hours after being questioned. Of the rest, 15 were placed under house arrest while 31 remain in police detention pending charges. As asserted by other GoRM officials (see Reftels), Latheef claimed that drug abusers and other hardened criminals, taking advantage of the unrest at the prison, were the root cause of the disturbance in Male'. Despite claims by the families of the prisoners, Latheef asserted that there was no evidence of torture by the NSS during any of the weekend incidents.

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COMMENT
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16. (C) At this point, the GoRM appears to have recovered some of its balance and verve after the rare breakout of unrest. During discussions with a visiting U.S. team in the immediate aftermath of the unrest, Maldivian government officials were clearly shaken by the events of September 19-20, which were the first serious domestic problems the GoRM has faced since a coup attempt in 1988. Gayoom's steady stream of actions and public appearances appear to have steadied the ship of state, however. This is particularly important for Gayoom who is the subject of an October 17 referendum on whether he should serve another five-year term as president. Despite the recent unrest, he is widely expected to win the referendum handily. It remains to be seen whether the riots were a flash in the pan or a deeper indication of substantive tensions toward the political structure in the Maldives. END COMMENT.

17. (U) Minimize considered.

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